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# Play as a Mechanism of Promoting Emergent Literacy among Young Children: The Indian Context

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## Abstract

The chapter has highlighted the status of emergent literacy in India, discussing the significance of play in early years. The sections have been summarized in a way to provide an overview of diverse play opportunities available to young children in the Indian setting. The authors have further correlated early learning experiences in the diverse cultural settings in India and how these practices contribute to enhance emergent literacy. Thus, it is crucial to emphasize the role of traditional games, stories and lullabies as a mechanism to enhance children's holistic development and learning. There is also a need for incorporating traditional play in the regular curriculum and classroom practices in early childhood programs. The chapter also reflects on the significance of inculcating cultural values and beliefs among children through traditional games, plays and stories.

**Keywords:** emergent literacy, early learning, learning through play, play in early years, play and early learning in Indian context

## 1. Introduction

Internationally early childhood years are defined as the period from birth to 8 years and are regarded as the most important years in a child's life. Research has indicated that period from birth to 8 years has a crucial impact on children's overall development and learning. There is a rapid growth in the brain during this period and any stimulation provided at this stage rapidly promotes the growth of the brain. By the time a child reaches 3 years of age, the brain has tripled in size [1]. The structural changes in the brain take place faster during the first 8 years than at any other stage of one's life. Synaptic connections are also made during the early years of a child's life. The strength of these synaptic connections is determined by the early life experiences as they respond strongly to outside stimulation. Since development and learning are directly related to the number of these synaptic connections, early childhood becomes the crucial period to help build a strong foundation and promote development and learning in young children.

Research evidence over decades also suggests that the experiences during the early years influence the overall health, behaviour and learning of an individual throughout his/her life. The Council for Early Child Development is a not-for-profit, charitable organization, founded in 2004 by Dr. Fraser Mustard and has worked on many research studies which advocate that the early childhood is the

‘period of opportunity’ and children’s experiences influence neural pathways for later development [2]. It is also suggested that the experiences young children have while their brain is developing will have an impact on their development and will remain with them for their entire lives [3]. Children’s experience during the early years set a critical foundation for their entire life-course [4]. Thus, early years are termed as the ‘critical period’ or ‘sensitive period’ which have an impact on the overall development of the child. The early childhood years are critical for the development of brain and its associated capacities like hearing, vision, numbers and language skills as well as social and emotional skills.

## **2. Emergent literacy in India**

Development of language and early learning capacities of children are inextricably linked. Interestingly the relationship between language, culture and identity are closely intertwined. Thus it is crucial to understand and have a common definition of emergent literacy for young. This term serves as a holistic package of language and literacy development in young children. This is especially with respect to biological, cognitive, social and emotional development among young children.

‘Emergent Literacy’ is a process of making an individual literate – that is positive reading and writing experiences by an individual in socially significant and personally meaningful ways. In addition to this, “emergent literacy” approach is characterized by looking at children “in the process of becoming literate” [5, 6]. Thus, it is significant for children to read books to have pleasure, co-read to make meanings, understand that print/script has association and directionality, writing and drawing can be used for expression and communication among others.

To summarize, the ability to read and write in young children or ‘emergent literacy’ is understood to be interrelated and interconnected, developing mutually through everyday play and other activities conducted by children. It is through these activities, children understand that written words make sense and have a meaning. The concept of emergent literacy also appreciates that the understanding about reading and writing in young children develops much before they enter formal school. In fact, young children are already in the process of understanding and constructing their language skills through interactions with family members and friends. Research into young children’s spontaneous engagements with written language before school-going age led to many new insights about the literacy acquisition process.

Research and related theories of child development and early learning suggest that early childhood from birth to 8 years is a critical period of development [7]. The foundation for future development and learning is laid down during this critical period from birth to 8 years, covering the pre-primary and early primary years.

The crucial early years are known to be critical for early learning and positive educational outcomes in later years, especially related with language and literacy skills [8]. This chapter focuses to highlight the status of emergent literacy in India, discussing the significance of play in early years. This will provide an overview of diverse play opportunities available to young children in the Indian setting and the impact on their holistic development.

## **3. Importance of programs in promoting positive emergency literacy among young children**

Early childhood educational programs play a significant role in a child’s life as they provide appropriate stimulation to young children at a ‘critical’ stage of their

life and help them develop their full potential. Early learning in the first 5–8 years of childhood has decisive consequences for academic performance in school, as well as overall welfare and performance at work [9]. The importance of the early childhood educational programs has been further advocated by the results and findings of various research studies. Recent research on cognitive development provides reinforcing evidence that early education is crucial in getting children off to a good start in life [10]. It is also reiterated that early childhood services, including preschools can have a major beneficial impact on young people's lives and give meaning to the long espoused social aim of children attaining their full potential in life [11].

The positive impact of early childhood education is observed on different outcomes in children, including increase in academic skills of the children. A longitudinal study reported that children enrolled in child care and preschool environments scored higher in reading, mathematics and fine motor assessment than children with no regular attendance in preschool or participation in early childhood programs [12]. Similarly, it is also reported that preschool has a positive net effect on English and Math scores [13].

In addition to academic benefits, early childhood programs also have a positive impact on other early outcomes, as children who attend preschool or other early education programs have been reported to have enhanced cognitive, verbal, and social development, and these benefits are maintained into the first few years of school. Moreover, children who attend an early childhood educational program exhibited enhanced pro-social behaviour like cooperation, sharing among peers and displayed less antisocial traits like delinquency. Findings from various research studies also report a positive impact of early childhood educational programs on cognitive, non-cognitive skills, school achievement, job performance and social behaviors and leads to lower juvenile delinquency and arrests [8].

Many economists have also reported that investing in early childhood programs has economic benefits in addition to the benefits to the individual. Investing in programs that provide education for young children also produces large economic returns. Every \$1 invested in services to help families with young children, between \$4 and \$7 was saved on child protection, health, education and justice system [14]. It is further elaborated that interventions at an early age have positive long-term benefits for the child and are also more cost-effective than interventions at a later age [15].

However, the quality of early childhood education is an important factor and influences the impact of an early educational program on children's learning and development. Various research findings have supported this statement. Two longitudinal studies, the Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian project have yielded sound empirical evidence and reported that high-quality early childhood programs have significant positive benefits for both the children and society in general. Similarly, the publication of The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) research findings have provided robust evidence that the provision of high quality early childhood education make a significant difference to the learning outcomes of young children [13]. This report on EPPE Project also stated that there is no single factor that determines preschool attainment but good quality early learning provision is important. Similarly other researchers and studies also reported that programs that provide high quality to children are more likely to provide long lasting benefits to the young children attending these programs. High quality programs are especially beneficial for children at risk and belonging to disadvantaged sections of the society. Evidence for the influence of high-quality, comprehensive preschool experiences to mitigate the negative effects of risk on disadvantaged children's emerging academic, social and self-regulatory competencies are reported by many studies. Moreover, high quality programs have also been reported to have a positive impact on overall development of children.



#### **4. Role of play in promoting overall development and learning among young children-unpacking play: concept of emergent literacy**

Emergent literacy is a term used to describe early reading and writing development among young children. It refers to children acquiring some language, reading and writing skills before formally entering the primary school. It includes listening, speaking, reading, writing and thinking. Literacy development does not begin upon entering a formal primary school, but it begins early in life and is an ongoing process. Emergent literacy is influenced in the context of home, with family members and peers. It is also viewed as the reading and writing behaviour that precedes and eventually develops into conventional literacy. It is thus, important to understand the sequence of changes and development that occur in young children.

The sequence of changes that occur in children's physical, motor, language, cognitive and socio-emotional skills are referred to as growth and development among children. These changes occur from birth and continue till the children reach adolescence stage. Children's holistic growth and overall development is often observed through their enhanced skills in the five domains of development mentioned above. Cognitive abilities include abilities of children to learn and problem solving, while socio-emotional abilities involve skills of interacting with others and mastering self-control. Language abilities include understanding and use of language for communicating with others. Physical skills include fine motor skills and gross motor skills.

Play has a major influence in developing the abilities and skills of children. It is argued, however, that free-flow play is at the centre of humanity across all parts of the world and within ancient civilizations [16].

According to popular beliefs, play is a concrete, manipulative, fun, hands-on, and creative activity. Play provides open-ended, self-discovery and theme-based teaching for children's learning and development. Varied play activities and opportunities lead to better physical, language, cognitive and socio-emotional skills among young children. As children engage in play activities, they tend to use language skills to communicate among each other, develop strategies to play and win, learn social skills to cooperate and share among friends. Thus, group play activities are especially relevant for enhancing overall development of children. Individual play activities are also equally important for overall development of young children.

All aspects of development and learning are thus influenced by play. Children are intrinsically motivated to engage in play activities even when they are very young. A 3-month old child loves to look at familiar face and smiles on recognizing the mother and enjoys participating in vocal exchange with the mother. An 8 month old child eagerly looks forward to playful exchanges with an older sibling and takes interests in games like peek-a-boo or hiding of objects. As children grow, their play grows in complexity and becomes more cognitively and socially demanding. Through play children learn to explore and discover, use their understanding to play imaginatively, express their emotions and inner feelings.

Play also helps young children in development of abstract thought by understanding the use of symbols as forms of representation. Play is also a beautiful medium for young children to understand and develop a sense of who they are, learn social skills of sharing, turn-taking and negotiation and deal with conflict with friends and family and learn to negotiate and solve problems. Play also helps children to cope with emotional loss and come to terms with any traumatic experiences.

A few important features of play that describe in more detail how children behave, and learn while playing have also been outlined. Children use the

first-hand experiences from life in their play [17]. They make up the rules as they play and make play props. Children choose to participate in play on their own; they cannot be made to play. Children also rehearse the future in their role-play and pretend play. Children play alone sometimes, or they may play with adults or other children.

Children playing get deeply involved while playing and it is often difficult to distract them from their deep learning. Children try out their earlier learning, skills and competencies when they play. Also children at play coordinate their ideas, feelings and make sense of their relationships with their family, friends and culture.

Based on the experiences as an early childhood educator and conducting observations in pre-primary and primary classrooms, the following play and learning activities were observed as helpful in developing and promoting emergent literacy among young children:

- Activities which encourage children to speak in the classrooms like show-n-tell, individual recitations, group recitations.
- Theme based, short-term, coordinated planning of play activities. The curriculum and activities to be conducted need to be planned keeping in mind theme-based planning and provide children with opportunities or experiences that integrate language and literacy activities.
- Efforts to integrate language and literacy activities during free play of children.
- Opportunities for listening to music or musical instruments in all classrooms. Planned musical classes for children should be included in the curriculum. Children need to be exposed to different musical instruments.
- Fun activities that help children experiment with reading and writing need to be planned and organized. These also help children to experiment with different writing materials.
- Reading a variety of story books also helps children to become aware of different writing styles.
- Writing has a communicative purpose; thus writing can be more meaningful when children write letters to their grandparents or friends make a list, make birthday invites and so on.
- Children need to be encouraged to participate in discussions and sharing their views.
- Teachers also need to provide opportunities to learn from peers. Creating learning corners, providing access to a variety of books and other literacy objects helps children in expressing themselves, thinking and sharing with their friends. Thus, more opportunities for collaborative learning can be provided by providing the appropriate classroom materials and planning such activities in the curriculum for the children.

In addition, traditional play activities in the Indian context are also useful in promoting emergent literacy among young children.

## 5. Diverse play opportunities available to young children in the Indian setting

Several researches and innovative early childhood care and education programs have recognized that children learn best through play and learning by doing. Children in the younger age group are naturally curious and exploratory in nature. They want to discover their immediate world using their senses and physical attributes. Many researchers in the field of child development have noticed children in constant interaction with their environment, and they want to touch, feel and experience everything they see. All that matters to children is to play and enjoy with everything they come across. Furthermore children learn by doing, by being the active participants in the learning process. Although play promotes growth and development among children, children do not engage in different play activities for these outcomes. Rather play among children is self-initiated and is often described as being natural, spontaneous, enjoyable and is a reward in itself.

### 5.1 Play and cultural diversity

One of the most common elements of childhood across cultures is play. Considering the diversity in India, it is utmost important to understand the diverse play opportunities available to young children in the Indian setting.

Moreover, exploring the relationship of play and cultural diversity is important for following reasons. First, a rapidly growing enrollment of young children from culturally diverse backgrounds is entering schools; this is significant in most urban cities where the migration is denser.

Second, play is a way for children to learn about the world around them. They not only learn about themselves but also about diversity in principles, ideologies etc. among other people. And finally, play can encourage positive bonding and relationships among children with diverse cultural settings and enhance a positive awareness of individual differences as well. Playing traditional games enhances friendships or health but it is deeply connected towards making children prepared for the journey called life.

### 5.2 Play and cultural values

Imparting cultural beliefs & values to young children is a way to orient young minds about their tradition in every society. There is also another thought that stresses upon the cultural influence on children and that it can come from many sources including the family, neighborhoods, child care and education centers, and the media. Play in early years also helps in developing a sense of pride and understanding of people in various cultures from the very beginning. Play is one of the mostly adapted techniques used with children to help them know and understand about their culture, practices, norms, customs, and values. It is also indicated that many traditional games with specific rules, provide a great means of communicating social norms of a society and form an integral part of that culture [18]. These games and their rules help in integration and solidarity among group members while providing aspects for segregation from other group members. Moreover, the types of play organized by children and play materials used are associated with their culture, for example, *kaudi* (small shells), pebbles and coconut shells are associated with communities living on beaches or near oceans and sea. Play during the early years also provides ample opportunities for young children to practice skills that will be useful to them as adults in that community. Play thus, serves an important role in enculturation.

This aspect is also enumerated in book on the history of toys [19]. The book describes that although some play materials such as toy animals or balls appear to be common among children everywhere, often toys and play materials mirror the culture in which children live. The author describes that at times children's play material might have religious significance, while at other times they may be related to skills of the adults in the community. The author also gives the example of Eskimos and how they made toys with ivory as ivory was easily available. Similarly people living near sea often made toy boats.

Similarly in India the play material available for children from different regions of the country depends on the locally available material to them. In Odisha, an east Indian state, children play with toys made of jute materials, while children living in the remotest village of Nandubar in Maharashtra, a west Indian state, have toys made out of wooden twigs, sticks etc.

Children can connect with their heritage through traditional games and this has a deep lifelong positive impact on their learning. Early childhood researchers and practitioners have been actively discussing the importance of play in the lives of young children and guiding ECE educators through different sources about the use of play and traditional games, stories & lullabies as a means of promoting cultural awareness.

## **6. Early learning experiences in the diverse cultural settings**

Children have been observed to play in diverse settings. Regardless of city, suburban, or rural settings, throughout the world, children play. If they grow up in an agrarian economy and accompany their mothers into the fields, they find ways to play within that environment, and there are reports that mothers who work in such settings also find ways to make the time with their children pass in playful ways [20]. Children play whether they live in rural or urban settings; belong to rich or poor families. One of the most common essentials of childhood across cultures is play.

Children's play is influenced by cultural backgrounds and it is imperative to recognize the importance of cultural influences on children's play. It is also important for early childhood educators to recognize the importance of play in the lives of young children in order to make use of play as a means of promoting cultural awareness.

It is important to understand the relationship of play and cultural diversity as a large population of young children belonging to culturally diverse backgrounds are entering early educational setups. It is through play that children learn about the world around them and learn about their own and other cultural values. Play helps children understand and enhance a positive awareness of individual differences and cultural diversity of other children around them. Thus, play experiences provide an excellent way to teach children about differences among communities and negate any negative perceptions or stereotypes.

## **7. Role of traditional games, stories and lullabies as a mechanism to enhance children's holistic development and learning**

Playing games has always been an exciting and the most loving part of growing up for us. Numerous times we fondly recollect the happiness experienced while playing childhood games. Most of us have definitely played traditional games when we were



young, going to the terrace or outside on the streets or nearby park to play with our friends, was the most enjoyable part of our daily routine.

Indian traditional games like—*Kho kho*, *stapu*, *Langadi tang* (*one-leg hopping*), skipping rope, *kancha*, *gilli danda*, *luddo*, and many more do not require exorbitant play materials or accessories like sports gear or specific shoes, all that is required is young enthusiastic & energetic children and space to play in.

Playing traditional games have always brought children together, encouraging teamwork and social interaction. Team games like *gilli danda*, *kho-kho*, encourages children to develop maneuvers to strategize and win the game. Unstructured play has a vital role in developing children's physical, behavioral and interpersonal skills, therefore the need to re-establish traditional play in children's lives.

Children also have an immense love for stories and lullabies. Stories help in creating an enchanting and delightful world for young children and help them in learning nuances of life. Storytelling provides an inimitable way to understand, respect and appreciate one's own as well as different cultures. This further helps in encouraging positive beliefs and attitudes towards diversity including people from different religion, communities, ethnicities and regions.

Folk-tales or folk-stories are constructed and told in captivating ways, and they carry huge entertainment prowess. Diversity exists in terms of stories considering the Indian setting and cultures they have. A common version of any story entails characters—human or animal—with the simple structure of a beginning, highlights, and conclusion. Often, these stories take shape of puzzles, with leading questions for children to express and solve it and further facilitates moral values among them. Almost all children are motivated by the suspense entailed in the stories, the characters and situations they are already familiar with. Children also learn to pay attention and to follow instructions, when the levels of stories extend from simple to complex. Moreover, many folk-tales, although essentially similar in situation, have been adapted in specific languages and therefore provide children with an opportunity to expand and learn their first language. Through the folk-tale activities, children use their short and long-term memory, exercise abstract thinking, and gain collective problem-solving skills [21]. Storytelling when narrated to children in various ways can Enhance intercultural understanding and communication among young children (**Figure 1**).

While listening to folktales and traditional lullabies, children participate actively, rather than listening passively. Children enjoy stories which are dramatic, vivid and involve situations that they have not heard about. Narrating stories and forming conversations around the characters and things in it, is the oldest form of imparting education about culture, family values and traditions. People around the world



**Figure 1.**  
Story telling by 'Katha' teacher.

have always told tales as a way of passing down their cultural beliefs, traditions and history to future generations. We all have a story to tell and a drive to tell it.

In India, children generally go out and play with their friends or cousins on the streets or nearby parks. These street games have been played by previous generations as children. Parents or grandparents often narrate stories and share their experiences of playing these games as young children. Some of these traditional games played through generations are described below:

- a. ‘Kanchas’ or playing with small stones or marbles was a caveman’s game (**Figure 2**).  
The origin of Kancha can be marked out to the early days of mankind. Kancha also known as Goti is an Indian traditional game which is mostly played by children and is cherished and fondly remembered by people of all ages. Kanchas are absolute fun to play with. The objective of this game is to hit a few marbles on the ground with your own marbles using a particular technique. Whoever is successful in hitting the targets takes the marbles of all other players and is the winner.



**Figure 2.**  
*Kancha or glass balls.*

- b. ‘Gilli Danda’ another traditional cricket-like game played on the Indian streets and villages (**Figure 3**).  
It is believed to be more than a thousand years old – dating back to the Mauryan Dynasty [22]. Gilli danda is known by various other names as well: like Tipcat in English, Lappa-Duggi in Pashto, Kon ko in Cambodian, Pathel Lele in Indonesian, Celikçomak in Turkish, Ciang sat in Zomi language, Đánh Trống in Vietnam and Quimbumbia in Cuba so on so forth. Gilli danda is played using two small wooden



**Figure 3.**  
*Boys playing Gili Danda on the streets.*

sticks which can either be prepared at home or with the help of the carpenter. While gilli is small, about 3 inches in length, the danda is 2 feet long with tapering ends, serving as a bat. The game is usually played in teams making a metre diameter circle on the ground and an oval shaped hole is dug in the centre of the circle and the Gilli is placed across the hole. The games allow the players to develop exceptionally good hand-eye coordination, ability to catch and strong wrists.

c. Kho kho is a traditional game that originated in Maharashtra one of the Indian western state (**Figure 4**).

This game is played widely on Indian streets and on special sports events like children's sports day in schools. The game hosts two teams, each containing 12 members, out of which 9 play at a time. The purpose of the game is to tag all the opponents in the team and the team with the shortest time to do so, wins. The game is one of the most popular sports in India and is enthusiastically played among children and adults alike. Besides the obvious health benefits, the game helps to propel sportsman spirit and camaraderie among the players. Since the game involves running, good for cardiovascular system. Hence, a kho kho game can help with a plethora of things.



**Figure 4.**  
*Children playing kho kho.*

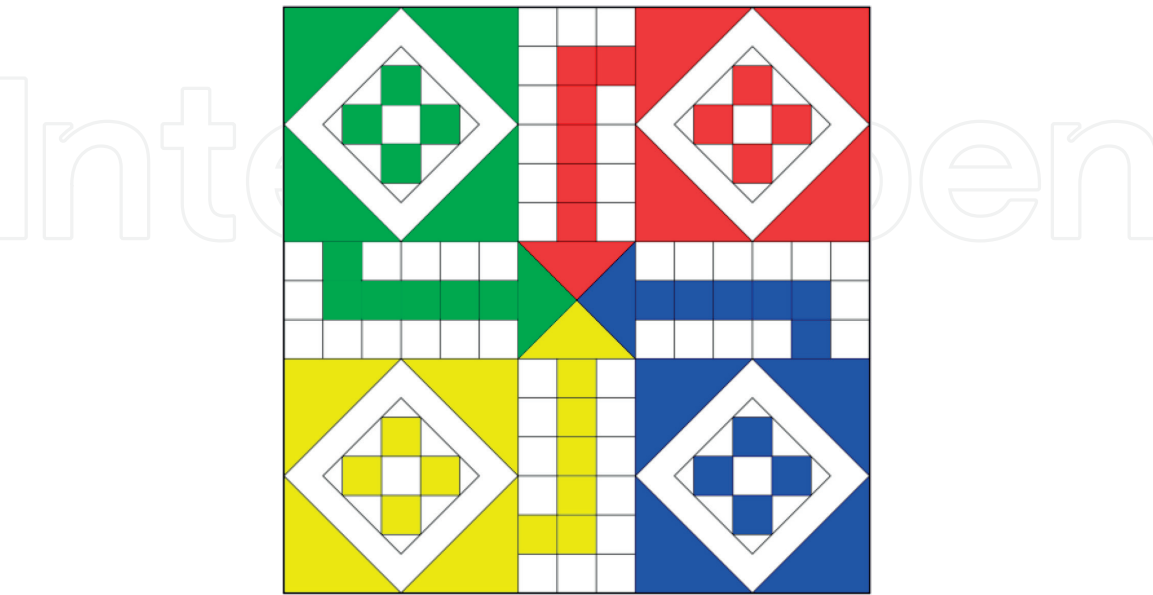
d. A popular playground game 'hopscotch' in which players toss a small object into numbered spaces of a pattern of rectangles outlined on the ground and then hop or jump through the spaces to retrieve the object (**Figure 5**).

This popular game is also played in other countries and is loved by all. In India it is called Stapu (Hindi), Nondi (Tamil), in Spain and some Latin American countries, it is rayuela, although it may also be known as golosa or charranca.



**Figure 5.**  
*A popular playground game of Hopscotch.*

e. ‘Ludo’, one of the most played indoor board game of India (**Figure 6**).  
This board game is an effective tool to develop child’s numeracy skills and positional language. Ludo is a great platform to reinforce the pre-number concept (counting, colors, and shapes) among young children. And just like any other game, the benefits of playing Ludo go beyond learning math.



**Figure 6.**  
*A board game—‘Ludo’.*

The benefits of the game include sharpening the concentration and enhancing the presence of mind. They also ensure the improvement in the focus and dedication of the child, this allows children to work on their eye-hand coordination, judgment skills, calculation as well. These games improve the concentration power of the player and further enhance their focus.  
Fascinatingly one can observe the expansion in child’s interactions with friends and at the same time attaining gross motor and physical strength [23]. Children also obtain better understanding of numbers and number related concepts like counting, sequencing, addition and subtraction. By grouping, regrouping, adding and reducing pebbles, children learn to do skip count of two, three, and four and so on and thus eventually learn multiplication tables. Thus, for early childhood practitioners working with young children and promoting developmentally appropriate practices, play becomes an important vehicle for advancing children’s social, emotional and cognitive development and also helps in promoting numeracy and emergent literacy skills [24].



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